DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 117 JC 000 078

AUTHOR Smith, Myrna J.
TITLE Caring, Community, and Transcendence: Developing Spirit To Improve Learning.
PUB DATE 1999-07-00
NOTE 16p.; In: Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University, 1998-1999; see JC 000 068.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; College Faculty; Community Colleges; Higher Education; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Student Reaction; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; Teaching Styles; Universities

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how faculty can and do develop a spirit in the classes they teach and thus become more effective teachers. This paper focuses on classes at a community college and at a university. Faculty and students from all types of college and university classes were interviewed. The classes studied were imbued with a breath of life, a spirit that not only supported learning but also the students themselves. From these observations, the paper lists three qualities that gave these classes that spirit, that breath of life: caring, community, and transcendence. These three serve as an antidote to alienation, isolation, fear, and more common motivational tools that tend to distort rather than nourish true learning. Faculty should not be concerned about alienation just because of its relation to school violence; they should be concerned because alienation impedes learning. The three college teachers described in this paper all worked against alienation by caring for their students, forming communities in their classrooms, and elevating their subject matter beyond the mundane. Their classrooms were places where spirit, that elusive quality, visited and sometimes, in magic moments, even prevailed. (VWC)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 437 117

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rabb Theodore

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CARING, COMMUNITY, AND TRANSCENDENCE:

DEVELOPING SPIRIT TO IMPROVE LEARNING

By

Myrna J. Smith

Raritan Valley Community College

Somerville, New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a

Mid-Career Fellowship

Princeton University

Professor Theodore Rabb, Director

June 1999

SC 000078

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Fortunately, American colleges and universities have escaped the school violence carried out in Arkansas, Oregon, and Colorado in 1998 and 1999. Institutions of higher education, influenced by cultural changes, play less of a parental role than they did thirty years ago. However, faculty regularly see disaffected, lonely, isolated, and fearful students pass through our classrooms every year. Many of us concentrate on the subject matter, believing the alienation of students not to be in our domain. However, faculty members have opportunities, because of the intense relationships that develop over a semester or a year of study, to influence students personally, even as our primary goal remains to help them master a field of study. Some faculty disdain becoming involved in the students' emotional or spiritual lives, while others embrace any opportunity. The primary purpose of this paper is to discuss how faculty can and do develop a *spirit* in the classes they teach and thus become more effective teachers.

Spirit has numerous definitions, including religious, sacred, and moral ones not directly applicable here, but those useful for this paper are "the breath of life" or "a character, disposition, or temper peculiar to and often animating a particular individual or group." Of course, once we use spirit, we can't ignore the adjectival form *spiritual*, the first definition being "of the nature of spirit rather than material." Another useful definition is "related or joined in spirit: spiritually akin: having a relationship one to another based on matter of the spirit."

These definitions, all from *Webster's Third International Unabridged Dictionary*, point to the essential problem of this paper, expressed eloquently by the Buddhist scholar Edward Conze, "Spirit is non-sensuous and we have no sense-data to work on. In addition spiritual actions are disintegrated when reflected upon. If they are not to lose their bloom, they must be performed unconsciously and automatically" (23). However, he argues that since it is the *spiritual* aspects of life that breathe meaning into it, "It seems rather stupid to discard the life-giving qualities of these realms simply because they do not conform to a standard of truth suited only to the natural world, where to the scientist phenomena appear worthy of notice only if they are capable of repetition, public observation, and measurement" (24). So despite the lack of hard data about student performance or even descriptions of repeatable techniques by teachers, I will proceed because I am convinced, like Conze, of the importance of the spiritual aspects of life, particularly that aspect that concerns us here: teaching and learning.

Perhaps a more traditional way of speaking about the spirit of a class would be to say the feeling or the affective qualities of a class. I became aware of different feelings in classes as a participant in a faculty development program called first the New Jersey Master Faculty Program and later Partners in Learning in which faculty pairs sit in each other's classes over at least a semester and sometimes a year. (For a full description of this program, see Katz & Henry or

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Smith & LaCelle-Peterson.) These pairs focused not on the performance of the teacher but rather on the response of the students to the teacher. In addition to the observations, each partner interviewed students in the observed class. Although these interviews could follow any number of themes the basic focus was, "How do students learn?"

For this paper I followed the same mode of inquiry as outlined by Katz and Henry, sitting in on classes, not just once but many times, both at a community college and at a university. I interviewed faculty from all types of colleges and universities and interviewed students from the classes that I perceived to be imbued with a breath of life, a spirit that not only supported learning but also the students themselves. From these observations, I determined three qualities that gave these classes that spirit, that breath of life: caring, community, and transcendence. These three serve as an antidote to alienation, isolation, and fear, more common motivational tools that tend to distort rather than nourish true learning.

Caring:

Parker Palmer begins his book *The Courage to Teach* with a quotation from a Rilke poem, "Ah, not to be cut off, not through the slightest partition/shut out from the law of the stars." But competition for grades, placement on bell curves, emphasis on being the best do tend to "cut off" marginal students, and even the best ones may feel too pressured to feel anything but anxiety.

The first night I sat in on Professor A's writing class, I felt as if no student, or even an outsider like myself, was cut off from the group or the subject matter. I intended to stay for only sixty minutes as the class began at the inconvenient five o'clock hour, but what I experienced made me stay longer. Professor A introduced me, made a few personal remarks, and then began by asking students to find points of comparison between two texts on nature. Students came in late, hurrying as if from work. She made no comment, certainly no criticism, but continued with the analysis, praising students for each insight. The subject matter wasn't unusually interesting—I had taught the same course almost a hundred times myself—but I felt so good being there. Joe, behind me, made a comment about not being able to understand how others could see so much in a text and said he wasn't smart enough to do it. Candy, in the front row turned to him and says, "Of course you are smart enough." I didn't leave; I even returned after the break.

What is the mystery of this professor? The one thing that I could name was that students felt cared for, even loved by her. Candy's casual remark to the floundering student most likely emerged from the prevailing feeling of the class: that everyone there is smart enough. Professor A's ignoring the late students comes out of her wanting everyone to feel comfortable, to be safe to learn.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In several of Professor A's classes that I attended, a student who had been unusually successful that week would read his/her paper. Early on a female student read a paper on the medical profession that included her bout with cancer. The student's voice cracked twice while she was reading. Students commented on why the paper was good, but no negatives were offered by Professor A or her students, a pattern that continued in less personal papers. (I did look at Professor A's written comments, and there were both positive ones, and recommendations for change.) Two things struck me: that students felt safe enough to expose personal issues and that Professor A imbued the students in all sorts of ways with confidence that they can learn to write well.

In interviewing her students I found that they did feel cared for and supported. One student who had an A going wrote a B paper and had decided not to do a rewrite because she found the paper too difficult. Professor A said in a disappointed way, "Are you sure you won't rewrite? I know you can do so much better." The student reported feeling cared for, so with just that little encouragement, she did the rewrite and maintained her unmarred A.

Another student spoke of Professor A's ability to direct students. Professor A "focuses on an individual and gives you an undivided moment that you can take with you and learn from." I was struck with the words "undivided moment" and speculate that it is that intense individual attention that Professor A is able to give both in and out of class that makes her such a successful writing instructor. Since her attention is so focused, she can see what the individual needs and give the help necessary. But giving an undivided moment is also an act of love.

Professor B's Interpersonal Communication class sat in a semi-circle that grew as students come in. He walked in a few minutes late, greeted me, then joined the semi-circle, talked with the student next to him, was silent for a moment, and began the class by asking if anyone has anything they would like to report. He asked that they follow the usual procedure of saying their names in case someone didn't remember. Andre reported that he has been named in one of the Who's Who listings; Craig said that he finally got up enough courage to see his grandmother in the nursing home, that she looked terrible, but he was glad he went; Wendy said that she finally told her aunt that whether she continued in school or not was none of her aunt's business. Students responded, "Good for you," and other encouraging remarks; then silence prevailed until the next person spoke. Professor B sat with a pencil and paper as if taking notes. He glanced up as each person began to speak and after each finished, but while anyone spoke, he looked at his paper, made some markings, and said nothing.

Why does Professor B just look at his paper rather than at the student who was speaking, I asked my informers? One believed that he doesn't want the students to read approval or disapproval into his expression, that they should speak because they have something to say. Another, a young man named Chris, said, "Teachers looking you right in the eye is scary. I have the feeling this guy is

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

eyeballing me, and he is going to prove me wrong and pound me into the ground. By not having that steady beam, you can feel more comfortable."

Not surprisingly, students report caring for students as one of Professor B's strengths. One of his students reported that he "listens with his entire self." This comment surprised me since Professor B doesn't look at them while they are speaking in the group, but I noticed that he did when speaking to them individually. Students have his undivided attention for a short time, even though his attention is very different from that of Professor A, who does look at students directly and does have an approving look on her face. Critics could argue that the examples of Professor A and B aren't typical because the subject matter is "soft"--just communication--and lends itself to the feeling realm.
That description might apply to Professor B, who teacher Interpersonal Communication, but certainly not to Professor A, who has a traditional academic background, writes grants, develops web courses, and at the same time is demanding of students in a traditional way.

The third professor whom I determined to have unusually good spirit in her class teaches mathematics. I observed statistics and calculus, both of which had two lectures and a lab. In the lecture Professor C used a combination of lecturing, doing problems on the board, and having students do problems at their seats. Students reported liking her presentation style, which is lively and interactive. They also enjoyed her practical examples, such as her handing out a newspaper clipping in statistics that showed the percentage of error possible in the political poll it was reporting.

But what about caring? The amount of work she collected and returned indicated she was willing to work as hard as they were, a quality I also observed in Professor A and students reported for Professor B. Richard Light in his report on *The Harvard Assessment Seminars* "The big point—it comes up over and over as crucial—is the importance of quick and detailed feedback" (31). Professor C also often demonstrated her investment in their success. At the end of one of the statistics classes, when Professor C had returned some exams, she approached one student and said that she would like him to come to her office to go over some of the things he didn't understand on the exam. "Would two o'clock today be good?" she said, not leaving it to him to make an appointment. Thus caring can be communicated, not only by affect, but also by simple hard work.

Jennifer, a young coed who looked as if she might be a model and had an A in calculus at midterm, liked Professor C's casual attitude "She doesn't seem overpowering. If she makes a mistake, she jokes about it." The student then commented about the respect she had for Professor C, and said that Professor C also respects students, a theme that runs through the student interviews for all three professors.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

One young man who wanted to be a physicist seemed very emotional in the calculus lecture, sitting in the front row and wanting to be sure he understood every problem. He previously had to drop out of school, and success was important to him. He reported that one thing he liked about Professor C was her ability to recognize what students needed. Twice she stayed after class when he needed help, and he didn't even have to ask her to do so. "She seems to have a sense when someone needs help." Another time in lab he was struggling with a problem on the "chain rule," an important calculus concept, and becoming upset with his inability to understand it. She said to him, "Do you want me to stay and help or go away?" He asked her to go away because he was too emotional to think clearly. Later he went back to get help, but he was impressed that she gave him the choice. Students in both calculus and statistics freely admitted their errors in front of other students, much like students did in Professor A's class, indicating to me that this was a safe place to learn.

Although I cannot say that Professor C's lecture classes kept the students or me on the edge of our chairs, she did not allow herself to get locked into the form of "lecture," where teachers do all the talking (in contrast to "lab" or "precept" where students talk). Although she did most of the talking in the lecture, working out problems on the board, she constantly checked back with the students to see if they were following her or if they could do the next step. She also asked students to do problems, alone or in pairs or threes, and, occasionally, wrote out mathematical explanations. The classes that I observed, both at the community college and the university, that were strictly lecture, where no student response was expected or given, had very little spirit in them, and, in fact, students sometimes slept. These lectures, content laden and competently done, did not apparently connect with the students enough to breathe life into the class. I am not asserting that lectures, with no audience interaction, can't enliven people—ministers would be in trouble if they couldn't—rather that I did not see any in the one hundred and fifty or so hours of class I sat in on for this study.

What about larger classes, say one of a hundred to three hundred? How could professors care for so many students? Although this is a significant problem, Karl Smith, an engineering professor and expert on cooperative learning at the University of Minnesota, whom I interviewed for this paper, has developed one technique. He forms student committees in each class for handling student issues, and he meets with that committee on a regular basis throughout the semester. Most problems that come up have to do with bureaucratic matters, such as changing dates of exams and projects to avoid conflicts with others, but students do have a forum for being heard.

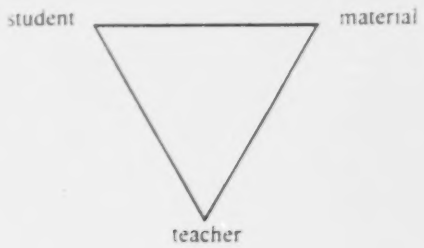
Caring for the needs of students, providing a setting in which they can learn, takes many forms. We see in the above examples some of the ordinary practices extraordinary teachers at any level do: giving encouragement and positive feedback, providing a safe environment in which to speak, and returning work quickly with detailed feedback. One additional quality that prevails in the classes

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

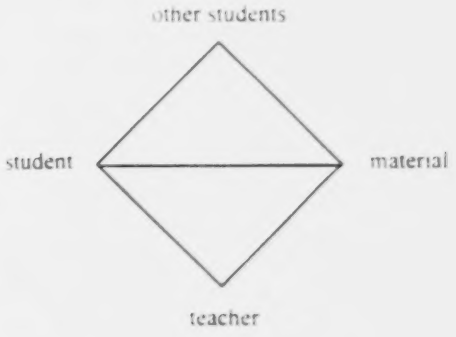
of Professors A, B, and C was an intense attention to individual students, "an undivided moment" to make them feel recognized and supported, and it is this quality that I believe contributed significantly to the spirit in the classes of these three.

Community:

The most basic connection in the teaching-learning situation, especially at the college level, is between the student and the material. In some situations, such as in correspondence or web-based courses, the student and the teacher may never meet. However, most students, particularly younger ones do not have the motivation or perseverance to stay with the material without some sort of community to provide support, guidance, motivation, or even inspiration or threat that is usually provided by a teacher. Therefore, we might picture the classic teaching model as an upside down triangle with the triangle with the teacher supporting the deepening connection between the student and the material.



Although a three-legged table is infinitely more stable than one with just two legs, we also know that one with four legs is what is needed to stand the pressure of every day life. So it is in the classroom, and the fourth leg, I propose, is the other students.



In this model I am still most concerned about the students developing competency with the material, but now the student has not just the support and guidance of the teacher, but also of his/her colleagues in the class. I believe it is this connection that is most ignored in college teaching and the one that has the most potential for changing not just the learning, but also the feeling, i.e. the spirit, in a college classroom.

Some of the teaching techniques that help develop community in the class are group projects, debates, group quizzes or tests, and class presentations. In the last ten years numerous books and articles have been published on cooperative learning, Karl Smith and Barbara Millis having written some of the best. Based on the work of Johnson and Johnson at the University of Minnesota, they outline careful procedures for forming groups and assigning work so that students experience a benefit for working in groups, called positive interdependence, but are still individually accountable (Johnson, Johnson & Smith and Millis & Cottell). However, neither Professor A (writing) nor Professor C (statistics and calculus) follow all of Johnson and Johnson's recommended procedure for using small groups, although certainly they foster positive interdependence. Professor B (communications) uses small groups only in very specific ways and relies primarily on self-disclosure as a vehicle for building community. There is no single ingredient necessary for developing a sense of spirit.

Small Groups: The way both Professor A and C formed groups seemed to be influenced by the their respect for the students as equal adults and their concern that students be comfortable in class. Neither teacher has any special seating arrangements. In Professor C's statistics class, for example, two students sat way in the back of the room, three rows behind anyone else. Neither Professor A or C commented nor reacted negatively when students came in late. Both, however, focused on what they wanted the students to learn. In some of the many classes I sat in on for this study, there were vast amounts of information, but it wasn't always clear what was essential and what was merely interesting. In these two classes it was: Professor A reported she finds "the North Star," a term from Rollo May about the importance of focusing on a significant concept and relating lesser ones to it, and keeps the students' eyes on it.

Not surprising both formed small groups rather loosely, letting students work with whom they wished. Professor C's calculus class met in a computer lab. The lab assignment for one day I observed was to determine how long it would take a raindrop to fall from the height of 3,000 feet. Most students formed groups of three, each group working around one computer, but in the center of the room were four students, sitting next to each other and talking occasionally with each other, but mostly working alone. Professor C said that she didn't want to require that student specifically work in groups after the initial assignment, but she did want them to consult each other. She wasn't willing to force students to stay in a situation in which they weren't entirely comfortable, but all were accountable for knowing the laws of falling bodies.

I interviewed one of the students sitting in the center row where the four students worked and asked him why he liked working alone. He said the main reason was he could finish his assignments at three o'clock in the morning if he wished, but he implied that he really did not like working alone but feared asking students to work with him. He sat off to the side in the lecture, and on some days paid little attention. Initially, I wondered if he were failing, but just the opposite was true. He often understood the lesson so well that he didn't need to pay attention to Professor C's explanation of the problems. He also said that he would enjoy helping other students with problems if he were asked. So here is the irony: one of the qualities—making students feel comfortable—that Professor C relies on to create the spirit of the class may work against the best possible results. If she assigned this student to a group, he would feel more connected, and because he understands the material so well, he could help less competent students learn.

Jennifer sat at a computer between two young men she knew from other classes. They also sat near each other in lecture and compared answers to problems, forming their own community. She reported they met outside of class every week to be sure they understood the concepts for that week. Uri Treisman, who won a McCarther Award for his tremendous success in teaching calculus in groups to types of students who previously had high rates of failure, uses assigned, stable groups throughout a semester. Of the students in Jennifer's groups, she earned an A, one man a B, and the other a D. Although a D doesn't sound like a good grade, Professor C said she doubted that student would have passed without the support of the group. Here we have an unanswerable questions: Was it the ease and comfort of Professor C that allowed this and other groups to form and flourish? Would Professor C lose the spirit that exists in her class if she insisted that all students belong to a semester-long group?

Professor A also has very loosely formed groups, and commented when I questioned her about them, "If they are working, why should I interfere." Professor A tells a story about how she uses small groups. For a writing class David wrote an in-class analysis of a John Donne poem "The Bait," interpreting it to be literally about fishing. She failed the paper, and when he challenged her on it, she didn't react or say that he was wrong, but rather asked if they could leave it up to the class. When the class sided with her, she let David select another poem to write another analysis. Here is what she said about David's case:

> I felt bad for David. At the same time there was something funny about it—which I would never share with the class. Fortunately, he cared, and something about the group caring carried him. That is something I think I know how to do. I give the groups tools—the way in. They can't just say, "that's good" or "I like that." They really have to know what kind of feedback to give him. As part of the assignment, students could only consult their group, so they had to help him, and he had to sit down by himself and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> write the blue book. I know how to use groups like cheerleaders: it is almost like watching a team—they are cheering a person on: they really want that person to do well. The class becomes a coach. Also I respected David for taking my challenge of saying, "Can we show this to the whole class?" He was so sure he was right: he was so close-minded, but he took the challenge. I knew I was setting him up because I knew how bad the essay was. I guess I was being a phony, and that added to my sympathy for him.

Professor A knew what she wanted: to teach David to understand the concept of metaphor. She did that while using the community of the class and his own small group, and most importantly allowing David to save face.

The point here is that teachers can use the class as a community to support learning. These two faculty members use loosely formed groups, because for them student comfort is a high priority. The safe feeling made adherence to the accepted rules of group work unnecessary. I suspect another reason they are both successful is that they have set up such clear goals--North Stars--for student learning. Professor A taught linguistic and rhetorical systems. Professor C specific concepts in calculus and statistics.

Professor B, the communication instructor, requires that students sit in a circle. In one evening class that I attended students began moving chairs to make a large circle, leaving the extra ones in the middle. He insisted not only that those chairs be removed, but also that the circle had to be moved in so that students sat close to each other. That evening he used an Awareness Wheel, described below, forming a circle within a circle. His configurations facilitated communication and community. It also supported self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure: Although Professor B uses self-disclosure as a primary mode of instruction, Professor A also makes sure students get to know each other. On the first night of the writing class a student reported that she asked students to tell where they are from, where they are going, and how they see this class fitting into that plan. Students could interpret those instructions in a variety of ways, but they had to construct a little "life story," making them known to each other from the first class. Many classes had students give their names on the first day of class, but few encouraged further self-disclosure.

Students in Professor B's Interpersonal Communications class had been asked to complete Awareness Wheels about difficult issues in their lives. Miller and Miller in their book *Core Communication* describe an Awareness Wheel as a "map of an issue," the "underlying structure" made up of "basic parts—sensory data, thoughts, feelings, wants, and actions" (41). Each of these parts are "distinct yet interact with one another," and "are present whether or not your are conscious of them," Miller and Miller claim. Professor B put a cloth copy of such a wheel, measuring about two by three feet, on the floor. The word *issue* was

written in the middle with *sensory data, thoughts, feelings, actions,* and *wants* (self and other people) written in sections around the word *issue*.

Professor B asked if any student would like to play out one of their issues in front of the class. Immediately, Denise jumped up and stood on the word *issue*. Five students from the class volunteered to sit around her to be prepared to ask her questions about the points on the wheel: each student was responsible for sensory data, thoughts, feelings, actions, or wants, if he thought she had not considered any aspect adequately. Professor B slid easily to the floor in the midst of the other students. The issue was that Denise would fail German if she did not get an A or a B on a test that was to be held in about forty hours, and she had to sleep, work, and attend class for most of that time.

She explained how she happened to find herself in such a vulnerable position, giving up blaming the institution (there had been a change in teachers) and the new teacher (it had been made clear what she had to know). She did not perceive herself as a victim, something I suspect this class had helped her come to. She talked about wanting not to disappoint her parents, particularly her father. When she discussed her action, she determined that she would probably have to sacrifice working although she hated to disappoint her boss. Students were then encouraged to ask her questions about one of the specific areas around the issue. Professor B gently cut off any student who gave advice or who digressed from the issue. Here he was sitting on the floor, directing the drama, carried out in concentric circles around Denise. Several students seem eager to "advise" her not to go to work, but Professor B demanded ever so kindly that the role of the class was to confirm that she understood all aspects of the issue, not to decide for her.

The subject matter of the class was a theoretical model for decision making. Denise and the class acted out that model before us--how could they, or I, ever forget it--on an issue that had immediate consequences for Denise. After revealing her dilemma to the class, she must have been able to feel the class members' support for her. Self-disclosure helped solidify the community of the class; at the same time students learned the content.

Another assignment that requires self-disclosure in Interpersonal Communication is the "bag share." Eric stood before the class and began a "bag share," telling the class about himself and showing objects from his "bag," which represented aspects of his life. Eric ended a story of parental support-- passes around pictures—fraternity life—showed a paddle inscribed with Greek letters--school failure and alcohol abuse, with on a goal for the future: "I want to be a journalist." Professor B responded, "I look forward to reading your editorials." Louise told her story, including her parents' divorce, crying twice during her talk. Later she apologized for being a "sap." Professor B said gently, "Don't apologize, the tears are a part of who you are." Professor B asked students to write a response to each of the presenters and, if possible, to speak to them personally.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What is the point of so much self-revelation? Wisely and Lynn, authors of a chapter in *Spirit at Work*, argue for storytelling, especially personal stories in leadership education because they "create conditions of openness where more formal procedural efforts have failed." They argue that an audience "suspends disbelief" and by doing so becomes open to the "veracity and perceptions of others: we listen and attend, instead of merely awaiting our opportunity to challenge the speaker. A special kind of space opens up....The climate thus created allows people to make connections between their experiences and to discover their common humanity in new ways, at deeper levels" (107).

Students certainly believed that self-disclosure helped them understand themselves as well as make connections with other students. Two of the students I interviewed said that the bag share had been the most important college project they had ever done. One student made a video that included TV images that were important symbols for him.

Students report that sharing so much information about their lives makes them feel more connected on campus. They enjoy meeting other members of the class on campus because it wouldn't be just a "hi," but a real meeting as they knew so much about each other. They felt a connection that supported them in the classroom and beyond.

Transcendence:

Transcendence offers another semantic difficulty because of its philosophical and metaphysical meanings; however if we use the first definition in *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, the quality or state of "going beyond or exceeding usual limits," we have a good start. But what are the usual limits? Some classes I observed were very factual, and the assignments and examinations dealt mainly with those facts. Others *transcended* the facts, as seen above in the discussion of Professors A, B, and C by bridging the gap between the larger world and the student's world. Wisely and Lynn write, "Community or our capacity for relatedness, is crucial to education. We learn by relating ourselves to a larger reality, one that includes other people but also...nature, history, thought, and spirit" (105).

The most basic way professors teach beyond the facts is by making the material practical or relevant, either for the present or the future. Professor C made both statistics and calculus practical when possible. Professor B's Interpersonal Communication class used on-going student issues as the material for the class, applying theoretical models to deal with that immediate material.

Subject matter also becomes transcendent when it is seen as part of a long history. Professor C gives the mathematical background when presenting a new topic. Some problems, such as finding an instantaneous rate of change, were ones

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the Greeks confronted and were not answered before Newton developed the calculus. Professor C points out to students that calculus opened up the possibilities for technology and is a forerunner of the industrial revolution. The formulas become, when put into their historical context, less things to be memorized, than important knowledge to be integrated into an understanding of the intellectual history of humankind. Even in skill classes, Professor C points out, "There is a larger picture to math that I hate to have them miss out on."

However, the main way that class becomes transcendent is when the student can see some aspect his life story connected to the material of the class. Professor A, the writing teacher, does this every semester for her research paper assignment. The paper requires that students research a topic connected to one of the texts read during the semester, but she often stretches the topic so that the student can write on whatever he is dealing with at the time. She reports,

> If they are having trouble, I will help them adjust their texts so they can address their problems. Once I had a Pakastani student who was divorced and had a child, and she was having a problem within the confines of her culture. She enjoyed reading feminine critics about Ophelia, about her boundaries and her inability to fight the system. She found it a relief to read critics, to find that her feelings of oppression were correct. She realized she had more options in our time period than Ophelia did in hers. So I will give them options for their research papers, either in fiction or non-fiction so that they can deal with their issues in text.

The Pakastani woman, as well as some of Professor B's students in Interpersonal Communications, could have dealt with their problems by talking to friends and fellow students or even by consulting a therapist. Wisely and Lynn see another place for our stories: "Whereas therapy (appropriately, for its purposes) turns us back on our own story, education opens our eyes to a larger context for that story. In relating our experiences to that larger context, we may also begin to perceive that our relation to one another extends beyond the tasks of the moment or the psychological economy of the workplace [or classroom]: that we have something called 'spirit' in common" (109).

I was struck by the power of personal stories in a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum seminar that I conducted some years ago. I asked the group members to write a paragraph or two about why they had chosen the field they were in. A mathematics teacher in the group wrote about her discovering the order of mathematics gave her a way of ordering her own life, which up to that point had not made much sense to her. It never occurred to me before that one would chose mathematics for deeply personal reasons, although I knew that I had chosen literature as a major because I wanted to talk and write about big human issues, mainly the meaning of life. However, it did occur to me, as I listened to the mathematics teacher, that we should be telling our stories to our students. Peter Senge writes about business leaders using their personal stories as a way of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

forming a common vision for the people they are leading. Although teachers and CEO are not the same, both can be inspired to use their personal stories by Senge's words:

> The leader's purpose story is both personal and universal. It defines her or his life's work. It ennobles his efforts, yet leaves an abiding humility that keeps him from taking his own successes and failures too seriously. It brings a unique depth of meaning to his vision, a larger landscape upon which his personal dreams and goals stand out as landmarks on a larger journey (346).

If we are to teach students, we must not treat our subject or their lives as small. Rather we must transcend littleness, inspiring students to learn how their lives connect with the big drama that has been marching forward for at least three thousand years.

I began this paper with the problem of violence in the school because I see violence being exacerbated by alienation, which is the opposite of the spiritual. Vaclav Havel speaks eloquently about a need for a shift in spirit and predicts a cataclysm if there isn't one. Although his statement is not directed particularly at the educational community, his urgency seems applicable: "Consciousness precedes being and not the other way around as Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than the human heart, in the power to reflect, in human meekness, and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our beings as human, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable" (qt. in Palmer, "Leading from Within" 21). Effecting a revolution in human consciousness is probably not a job description most faculty would find palatable, but perhaps many would attend to the *spirit* in the classes they teach if they thought it were possible or could be convinced it had educational value. And I am arguing that it does.

Faculty should not be concerned about alienation just to stop school violence: They should be concerned because alienation impedes learning. The three college teachers described here all worked against alienation by caring for their students, forming communities in their classroom, and elevating their subject matter beyond the mundane. Their classrooms were places where spirit, that elusive quality, visited and sometimes, in magic moments, even prevailed.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Works Cited

Conze, Edward. *Buddhist Thought in India*. Ann Arbor: U Michigan, 1967.

Johnson, David W., Roger T Johnson, and Karl A. Smith. *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

Light, Richard. *The Harvard Assessment Seminars: Explorations with Students and Faculty about Teaching, Learning, and Student Life*. The First Report. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990.

Miller, Sherod and Phyllis A. Miller. *Core Communications: Skills and Processes*. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communication Programs, 1997.

Millis, Barbara and Philip G. Cottell, Jr. *Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty*. Ace/Oryx Series on Higher Education. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1997.

Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

Palmer, Parker J. "Leading from Within: Out of the Shadow, into the Light." *Spirit at Work* by Jay Conger and Associates. The Jossey-Bass Management Series. San Francisco, 1994.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990.

Wisely, D. Susan and Elizabeth M. Lynn. "Spirited Connections: Learning to Tap the Spiritual Resources in Our Lives and Work." in *Spirit at Work* by Jay A. Conger & Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE